

From Good to Great

“Every good-to-great company became a pioneer in the application of technology...” This is one of the answers Jim Collins, author of Good to Great, discovered when he asked the question, “What are the universal distinguishing characteristics that cause a company to go from good to great?”

By Bryan Trilli

As Collins pointed out, “When used right, technology becomes an accelerator of momentum, not a creator of it.” In other words, properly aligned technology will help improve, accelerate and manage your business growth. In some of the examples Collins gives, he refers to cutting-edge manufacturing techniques.

If you are reselling equipment and products, you may have almost no hand in manufacturing. Therefore, according to Collins, your accelerator must be more like those that the companies Kroger and Walgreens created: intimate systems that allow a company to better serve its customers while decreasing costs and improving efficiency.

What technology can you use in your business to accomplish these tasks? Unlike Walgreens and Kroger, you do not have to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in your own proprietary management system because software companies have already created one for you.

If comparing your business to Walgreens and Kroger seems a bit out of place, consider one of the main points Michael Gerber makes in his *E-myth* series of books—quantification. Gerber makes his point that, “You can’t ask too many questions about the numbers.” His questions include:

- How many people call your business each day?
- How many call to ask for a price?
- How many want to purchase something?
- How many of a certain product are sold each day? Each week?
- Which days are busiest? How busy?

The point is, in addition to using systems and processes similar to large organizations to improve your business, you need to utilize technology that will enable you to work on your business, not just in it.

As a small- to medium-sized business owner or manager, you do not have the time or expertise to be your own lawyer, accountant, banker or IT specialist. Therefore, just as your accountant notifies you of the latest tax law changes, your software provider should be making you aware of the latest technologies in the industry. Even more importantly, the provider should let you know how to effectively implement them in your business.

Let’s look at a few specific examples of how management software designed for the retail water industry can make a difference.

Needless Repetition

After visiting more than 100 water dealers in nearly every franchise over the last few years, Collins discovered that needless repetition is probably the most common theme in the industry. In many areas of business, data entry tasks are unnecessarily repeated in multiple places.

For instance, quite a few businesses used accounting programs, such as Quickbooks or Peachtree, that still require four different systems for managing customer accounts—one to accomplish each of the following tasks: billing, lead tracking and prospecting, scheduling and service management.

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Technology that
helps you work on
your business, not in it

applications—software

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Few businesses have made the commitment to combine all of these tasks into a single program with a single customer list. If they are still separate, at the very least employees need to input the customer's name once for each of the four programs. Generally a phone number, address and some sort of comment accompanies it as well. To compound the problem, that data now becomes extremely difficult to quantify.

Try to answer Gerber's question of how much revenue each technician is generating or how many rental units were lost to competitors last month. To start answering

questions like these, you would need a whole series of spreadsheets and data tracking by hand to compound the repetitive entries. What happens when you are trying to grow your business and need to cross-market salt service to your softener customers or a drinking water system rental to your cooler customers?

Inefficient Processes

Did you know that:

- It takes six times longer to grab a file from the filing cabinet than to look at an electronic version?
- The average delivery route that has not been rerouted in a few years will see a

10 to 15% increase in efficiency with a computer-aided reroute?

- Without handheld delivery computers, you are wasting nearly 40 minutes per route per day just inputting transactions?
- The average dot-matrix form costs nearly five times more than a plain paper form designed to accomplish the same task?
- You can require all new rentals (or customers in general) to sign up for an automatic bank account or credit card withdrawal of their monthly balance with the payment automatically entered onto their account?

This article does not permit an exhaustive review of each of those topics; however, hopefully it provides a few ideas in areas where "you don't know what you don't know."

Employee Incentives

If you walk into almost any business and ask, "What is the most difficult thing about being a business owner?" you will almost always learn that it is finding and keeping good employees. After interviewing more than 80,000 managers for their book *First, Break All the Rules*, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman discovered that there are 12 basic questions that "measure the core elements needed to attract, focus and keep the most talented employees." Here are a few of the questions your employees would need to

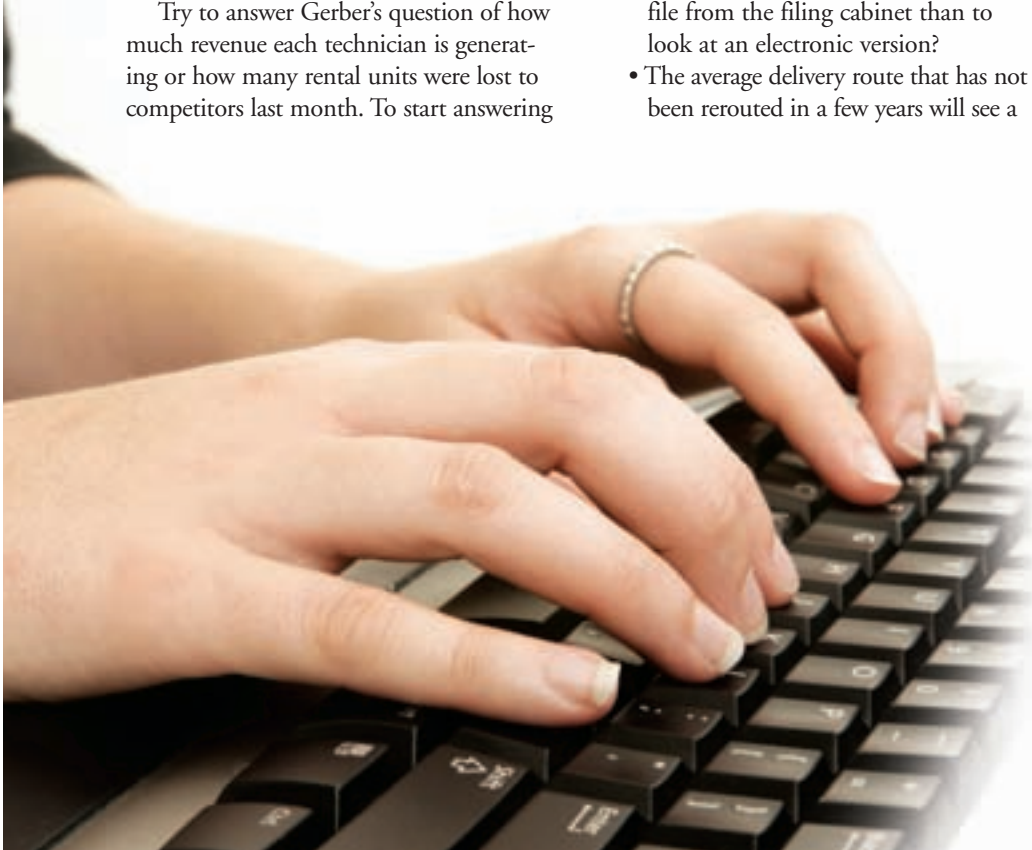
answer positively:

- Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
- In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for doing good work?
- In the last six months, has someone at work talked to me about my progress?

For your business to operate at peak performance with the highest caliber of employees, you will need to have high marks from your employees on all 12 questions. These questions, however, jump out as being very difficult to answer without the proper technology. The first question is somewhat obvious in that it is necessary to equip your:

- Office manager with a system to effectively manage and bill customers;
- Sales manager with a system for effectively managing leads, marketing projects and cross-marketing to existing customers;
- Route manager with an efficient system for optimizing routes; and
- Service manager with an easy way to track service issues and departmental profitability.

Just as you may be able to deliver 100 bags of salt, transport a few hundred bottles of water or install three new residential units with a half-ton pickup and a few trips back to the office, your business can still operate without the most advanced technology. Unfortunately, that may require you to invest more time





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working in your business than on it. If you are wearing all of these hats, then it is even more imperative that you are leveraging your talents to spend as little time on each area as possible while achieving the greatest results.

For your employees to positively answer the second question asked by Buckingham and Coffman, find an effective way of tracking performance in real time without waiting until the end of the month. Are you checking to see if your bottled water driver signed up a few extra cooler customers this week? Did you notice that your service technician saved an account? Did you know that your office person fielded 50 phone calls Wednesday morning? Do you even have a method for tracking the calls of praise that come in about your staff who are dealing with your customers every day? Perhaps you only track the service call-backs and upset customer calls.

To answer the final question, you need performance benchmarks and targets. Getting back to Gerber's insistence on quantifying everything, do you know what effective service technicians should produce, what incentives they need to receive and how to track all of that without pulling your hair out? Even more obscure is a method for tracking and rewarding the performance of office personnel when your software only tracks billing or service.

Make it Work in Your Business

It is important to understand that, as Collins indicates, "Technology cannot turn a good enterprise into a great one." Technology cannot take a poor company and turn it into an instantly profitable one. It cannot make your employees work harder and praise them when they do. It will not tell you how to handle underperforming personnel.

What properly aligned business software can do, however, is accelerate your growth by systematizing routine tasks and allowing you to focus on growing your business instead of working in it. It can help you easily track the performance of employees so you know when to praise and when to encourage them. It can help you compare great employees with average ones; this will help you determine how to hire more great employees and select the best methods for rewarding them. This is important because ready-made software provided to you (and every one of your competitors) in the same tidy package never answers the questions, "What's the best technology for me?" and "What's the best way to implement it to meet my goals?"

An entire service industry has sprung up around Microsoft products, including training, certification, recommended resellers and local support personnel because, without the proper implementation plan and ongoing support, no

technology will benefit your company. Make an investment in your business and take a few minutes to learn how the right technology, with the right support, can help you. It may surprise you to learn how that technology will pay dividends back to your business again and again. *wqp*

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